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AUTHOR Svec, Henry J.
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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates specific "gifted" qualities of some learning disabled students within the context of assessment and individualized programming. It is suggested that learning disabled children who have definite areas of strength receive "selectively enriched" programming in these areas. An educational model is proposed which would allocate the greater portion of program time to teaching to student strengths. After comprehensive multi-method evaluation, basic coping skills would be taught in the deficit areas, while an enriched educational program stressing career goals and interests would be provided in the areas of strength. Periodic re-evaluation would provide ongoing program modification. (DB)

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Learning Disabled or Selectively Enriched?

An Application of Student Strengths to Program Planning

Henry J. Svec

Michigan State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Abstract

This article investigates the specific "gifted" qualities of learning disabled students, with application to assessment and program implementation. It is suggested that evaluating and stressing strengths in such students may significantly impact performance and program delivery.

Learning disabilities are said to refer to learning difficulties that can be associated with mental retardation, brain injury, sensory difficulties, or emotional disturbance (Sattler, 1982). Specifically Kauffman (1979) points to descrepencies in verbal and performance scores on the Weschler Intelligence Scale For Children as an indicant to this typology. Public Law 94-142 defines the term:

"Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or writtten, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage."

Hartlage (1973) implies a differential diagnosis for learning disabilities including dyslexic, dull normal, brain injured or emotionally disturbed children. The author concludes that differentiating between "types" is possible

with perceptive diagnosis and evaluation. However Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1983) suggest that the identification of children as "learning disabled" is a non-productive process with difficulties in identification and remediation of suggested "deficits". The authors report that teachers, and not specific diagnosis often decide who is "learning disabled", non-handicapped students are being identified, using a variety of criteria 75% of the general population could be labelled learning disabled, teachers and psychologists are no better than untrained judges in diagnosis, and that final placement decisions have little to do with the data gathered.

While school psychologists are often asked to evaluate students for possible placement the authors suggest that with regard to assessment:

"..administering standardized tests to confirm teacher observations is wasteful, administering standardized tests to plan instructional programs is ineffective, and administering standardized tests to evaluate educational progress is failing."p30

The authors conclude that what is needed is a new philosophy in special education, to replace the old ineffective methodology.

Cordell and Cannon (1985) present the thesis of the gifted/learning disabled adolescent who is often overlooked in traditional educational evaluations. The authors note that gifted/learning disabled students often possess discrepencies in verbal and performance functiong as measured by the WISC-R, fine motor, visual perceptual,and organizational delays, attention deficit disorders, low frustration tolerance and vulnerability in social relationships. The authors provide a host of specific strategies to meet the needs of these students. Similarily Moller (1984) describes specific teaching strategies for the education of these "learning disabled " students.

This literature suggests that traditional classifications of learning disabled children have been ineffective with the identification and treatment of the disorder. In a similar context, gifted/ learning disabled chldren have been described as having similiar profiles as that of traditional "LD" children. This suggests that children placed in special programs to remediate deficits may in fact have specific strengths in certain areas. For the purposes of the remainder of this discussion these children will be termed "<u>selectively enriched</u>" with the suggestion that in an effort to provide for appropriate programing, teachers, parents and school psychologists identify and develop these strengths.

Defining the Term

Feldman (1979) reports that traditionally giftedness has meant an I.Q. of 130 or above and genius an IQ of 150 or above. The author proposes a nonelitist concept of giftedness that is broadened to encompass many more kinds of gifts with a shift from trait to developmental perspective. The author also reports of a study that was designed to evaluate the number of fifth-grade students who could be identified for a gifted program on the basis of universalistic criteria. He concludes that 92% of that sample would qualify for service. This study introduces the concept of "universalistic enrichment" and the non-elitist use of the gifted term. Students have specific skills in certain areas that may be hampered by deficits in others.

Daniels (1983) divides gifted children into four distinct groups including gifted with no learning, reading, or language disability, gifted with no disabilities but not performing up to potential, gifted with a learning disability but functioning at grade level and gifted with a learning disability but not succeeding at grade level or level of academic potential. The fourth category of giftedness describes the child traditionally labelled as learning disabled who demonstrates a specific descrepency between ability level and actual academic functioning. These

students although demonstrating specific deficits also possess specific strengths in relation to selective intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor functioning. These students are "selectively enriched" meaning they may excell at specific academic and non academic tasks.

How many students presently identified as learning disabled meet the criteria for selective enrichment, and what effect will a new "label" have on their programming? The initial aspect of this question would lead school psychologists and teachers to re-evaluate LD students with the specific task of identifying those with strengths who may be able to cope in a regular program. I suggest a significant verbal-performance descrepencacy as suggested by Daniels (1983). This would come as the result of a comprehensive multi-method evaluation, including traditional psychological examination, teacher, parent and child interview, with specific vocational and interest diagnosis. Model 1 provides a further explanation of this process.

Put Model 1 about here.

Initially a child is referred for an evaluation on the

Model 1
"Selective Enrichment"

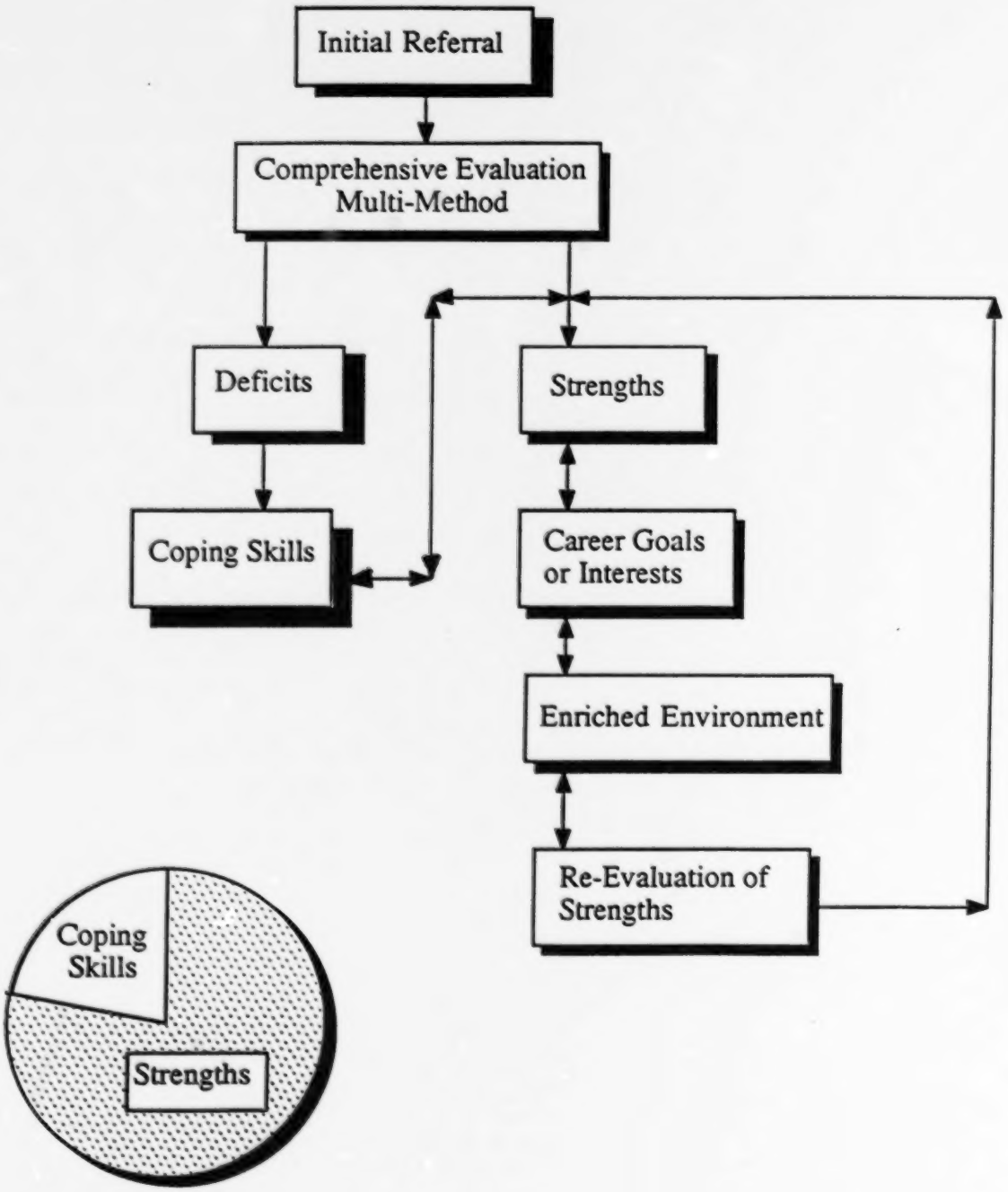

Figure 1.
Allocation of Program Time

basis of teacher or parent recommendation. A comprehensive multi-method evaluation leads to the identification of specific strengths and deficits that require the application of select coping strategies. As Schumaker (1981) and Tollefson (1981) report traditional techniques for the remediation of deficits have failed. These authors provide evidence of the effectiveness of teaching coping strategies in an effort to overcome deficits. The identification of career goals and interests would help assist children in utilizing strengths that can be developed through specific interests. This "interest" evaluation would then lead to the creation of an enriched environment to provide specific programming to emphasize identified strengths.

Put Figure 1 about here.

Periodically re-evaluations of strengths will help teachers, parents, and school psychologists evaluate program effectiveness. Specific coping skills may include self monitoring for behavioral and attention deficits, self questioning and a variety of meta-cognitive strategies to improve academic functioning. Following the application of these strategies, a re-evaluation would involve the identification of improvement in coping ability, and not specific academic achievement levels. This re-evaluation would then lead to possible re-programming and planning.

As an example students who possess high verbal and low performance on the WISC-R may have selective enrichment in the verbal area. While their performance on visual tasks may be considered a deficit, a comprehensive evaluation that revealed specific strengths (e.g. ability to verbally communicate) may lead to:

1)Programs designed to emphasize their strengths;

2)A recognition of skill areas, and potential career and vocational choices based on these abilities;

3)Compensation for weaknesses by utilizing strengths;

4)Improved self-concept based on the ability to compete in specific areas;

5)Recognition by teachers, school psychologists, and administrators that students have specific abilities that require specific training;

6)De-isolation and a return to mainstream for the student with periodic resource withdrawl for coping strategy application and evaluation.

In summary this introductory article identified a select group of learning disabled children who were more appropriately labelled "selectively enriched". The failure of traditional LD programming to improve their academic and later vocational functioning, suggests concentrating on specific individual strengths to enhance these "selectively

enriched" children. Future research should further define the incidence of this phenomena among the traditional "LD" population, with more specific implications to program and practice.

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